

" GREAT PERSONALITIES "
ANNE SULLIVAN MACY

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"GREAT PERSONALITIES"

*Radio Narrative of
the Life of*

ANNE SULLIVAN MACY

the Devoted Teacher of

HELEN KELLER

AS BROADCAST BY

FRAZIER HUNT

IN THE NEW YORK LIFE RADIO HOUR

ON TUESDAY, NOV. 17, 1931



ANNE SULLIVAN MACY (standing) and HELEN KELLER

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The Story of Anne Sullivan Macy

By *FRAZIER HUNT*

I HARDLY know where to start this story. It has touched me so deeply and profoundly that I wonder if words can possibly convey its beauty, its spirit, its sublime faith and its abiding devotion. During the past fifteen or twenty years, I have met and talked to many of the great men and women of the world—statesmen, soldiers, presidents, kings, financiers, revolutionists, explorers, scientists, teachers, artists, poets—men and women of great and acknowledged accomplishments. But to me none of them compares to these two rare women, the heroines of this story. Theirs is a triumph far beyond that of money, fame or any of the usual media of success—theirs is a triumph of the spirit—the miracle of what love and devotion and patience can do. It is the most beautiful story that I know of in the whole world.

Shortly before the Civil War began, two Irish emigrants, poor and uneducated, came to this land of opportunity. They met, loved and married, and in a little country community, called Feeding Hill, Massachusetts, near Springfield, on an April day in 1866, their first child was born, a baby girl named Anne Sullivan. When this plump, smiling little girl was three or four years old, measles swept over the country side and left this child almost blind. Shortly after this, her mother died and she was taken by an aunt to raise. She was a kindly and affectionate woman but this half-blind niece

was a great charge. The shy and underprivileged child could not play games with the other children, and when she grew old enough to go to school, her eyes were so poor that it was thought useless to send her.

All those years of her girlhood, she was an isolated, hopeless little creature, doing small household tasks and living in a world apart from other children. This was sixty years ago and there was little provision then for these underprivileged children, but over in Boston the Perkins Institution for the Blind had for years been bringing light to those who could not see. And some kindly physician suggested that this little, half-blind girl of fourteen, Anne Sullivan, be sent there. And so, almost a young woman, she was brought in touch for the first time with elementary studies. She had children to play with and interesting and sympathetic teachers—a whole new world to live in. Quickly she learned to read the Braille System of printing for the blind. And here, at the Institute, the famous Laura Bridgeman, then an old lady, was living, and this extraordinary woman herself taught this child the Manual Alphabet for the deaf, the spelling of the letters by the fingers in the hand. Laura Bridgeman was the first blind and mute person who had been led out of the silent shadows into a world of thought and mental development. Up to this time, the deaf and the blind children had been treated as idiots and left to live out their pitiful little lives in silence and darkness and fear. But the terrible tradition had been broken in the case of Laura Bridgeman. She had never learned to speak, nor had her education progressed far, but she had

been given a new life by the skill and patience and imagination of Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, who had been the head of the Perkins Institution. And as I have said, it was by this extraordinary woman—this blind and mute Laura Bridgeman,—that young Anne Sullivan was taught the Manual system of the alphabet.

Now that same year of 1880 when Anne Sullivan, this half-blind, fourteen year old child of poor Irish emigrants, entered the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, a baby was born in a cultured Southern home in the little town of Tuscumbia, in Northern Alabama. Her name was Helen Keller and for the first eighteen months of her life she was a normal baby. Then some strange malady attacked her, possibly some unknown complication of sinus trouble. When the fever left her, it was discovered that she was blind and deaf; that forever her world must be a black and silent void, a world unspeakably pathetic and hopeless, a world of terror and fear, lit with only the vaguest of baby memories of sound and color and beauty.

When Helen was six her father, hearing of a great eye specialist in Baltimore, had taken her there, but this Dr. Chisholm shook his head; he could do nothing. But he told him that Helen could be educated, and advised that they should consult Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, who only recently had invented the telephone and who had been passionately interested in the underprivileged because his mother for years had been deaf. The father hurriedly left for Washington and called on the great inventor; and between Helen and this bearded genius, this kindly and wise man, developed a

friendship that has marked her whole life. She calls him "my oldest friend." Dr. Bell advised Helen's father to write to Dr. Anagnos, Director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind at Boston, for a teacher for Helen. Dr. Anagnos chose the half-blind girl, the daughter of the poor Irish emigrants, Anne Sullivan—the star pupil of the school. Laura Bridgeman, the blind and mute woman, not only had taught Anne Sullivan the Manual Alphabet but had inspired her with the belief that nothing was hopeless or impossible. And so the half-blind Anne journeyed South, fired with a great purpose, to find the secret key that would unlock the barred door and free this caged soul from her black and silent prison.

Helen was seven and her teacher was twenty. With a patience almost beyond description and with a faith that could move mountains and a love that knew no bounds, this young teacher started her work. First she took Helen's doll and gave it to her and spelled out in her hand, over and over and over again, the letters d-o-l-l. Two or three days later, she taught her the word "cake,"—giving her first a bite of cake and then spelling over and over again the letters c-a-k-e in her hand. At the end of a month, she had taught Helen possibly thirty words—disconnected, unrelated words; and then she tried the great experiment of putting two words together so that Helen would have to think out what they were. She had learned the word "mug" and now the young teacher put water into the mug and placed Helen's finger in the cup and spelled out the word "water." Over and over again she tried this, but somehow she could not get the

little girl to differentiate between the water and the mug that held it. Her mind, wrapped in silence and darkness, didn't seem to be able to grasp the significance of the two. Discouraged and heartsick, the young teacher took her charge out into the sunlight. An old-fashioned pump stood by a garden house and in a flash of inspiration, she led Helen to the pump, put her hand down and pumped water on it and then spelled over and over again the word, w-a-t-e-r. And then the miracle happened. The chains that were holding back this mind seemed to break. The tiny soul itself seemed to be freed. Helen danced with joy! She *thought*—for the first time. And on that day her young teacher taught her as many words as she had learned the whole month before. What a joyous day it was for the child—suddenly made eager, inquisitive, alive with curiosity; and all these forty-three years since then, Helen Keller has been always that—eager, inquisitive, alive with curiosity.

Now began the long climb upwards to the stars: Patiently, skilfully, brilliantly, the young half-blind Anne Sullivan led her eager child-pupil along the stony path of knowledge, culture and wisdom.

When Helen reached her eighth birthday, an experiment started that never before had been successfully attempted—to teach a deaf and blind child to speak. With only her fingertips as a guide, she was taught to speak syllables, consonants, vowels and then words—her sensitive fingers pressed to the lips and throat of the speaker—until she could express her thoughts so that any one listening carefully could understand her. It would be hard to explain how she talks. The nearest comparison I can

think of is the utterance of an old Indian Chief. But it isn't the way she talks that is important; it is the beautiful and wise things that she says.

And so up the long trail these two, Anne Sullivan, the teacher, and Helen Keller, the pupil, climbed together; they grew up together, they learned together, until both were liberally and broadly educated. At eighteen, Helen Keller was sufficiently prepared to enter Radcliffe and, in four years, to graduate there with honors.

Then began their busy and useful mature life that now has turned to the great work of raising a two million dollar endowment for the American Foundation for the Blind, half of which is already raised.

I said a minute ago that both these two, teacher and pupil, grew up together. Literally, the teacher led by the hand the stumbling child until today this once hopeless soul, who for almost fifty years has been living in a black and silent night, is one of the most cultured women in the world.

A few years before he died, the incomparable Mark Twain said: "There are two great characters in the 19th Century. One is Napoleon and the other is Helen Keller." And only last week H. G. Wells called her "the most remarkable being I met in America." She reads English, French, German, Italian, Latin and Greek. She is abreast of the thoughts and ideas of the world. Sightless, she has seen the poor and afflicted, the down-trodden and submerged. She has seen injustice and unfairness, the tears of the world. Without hearing, she has heard the cries of humanity, of hungry children, of abused men and women, of the homeless and disinherited of the earth! Without eyes, she has seen,

and without hearing, she has heard. And as she so beautifully said to me: "Blindness of the eyes is not to be compared with blindness of the mind and the heart."

A number of years ago her teacher, Anne Sullivan, married John Macy, an author and instructor, who had been extraordinarily helpful to Helen in preparing her earliest book and who later, as Mrs. Macy herself said to me with a chuckle, discovered that he "had married an institution" and was allowed to resign. Today this miracle teacher is a smiling, plump, motherly woman of sixty-five, a living part of this rare union between teacher and pupil—master and disciple.

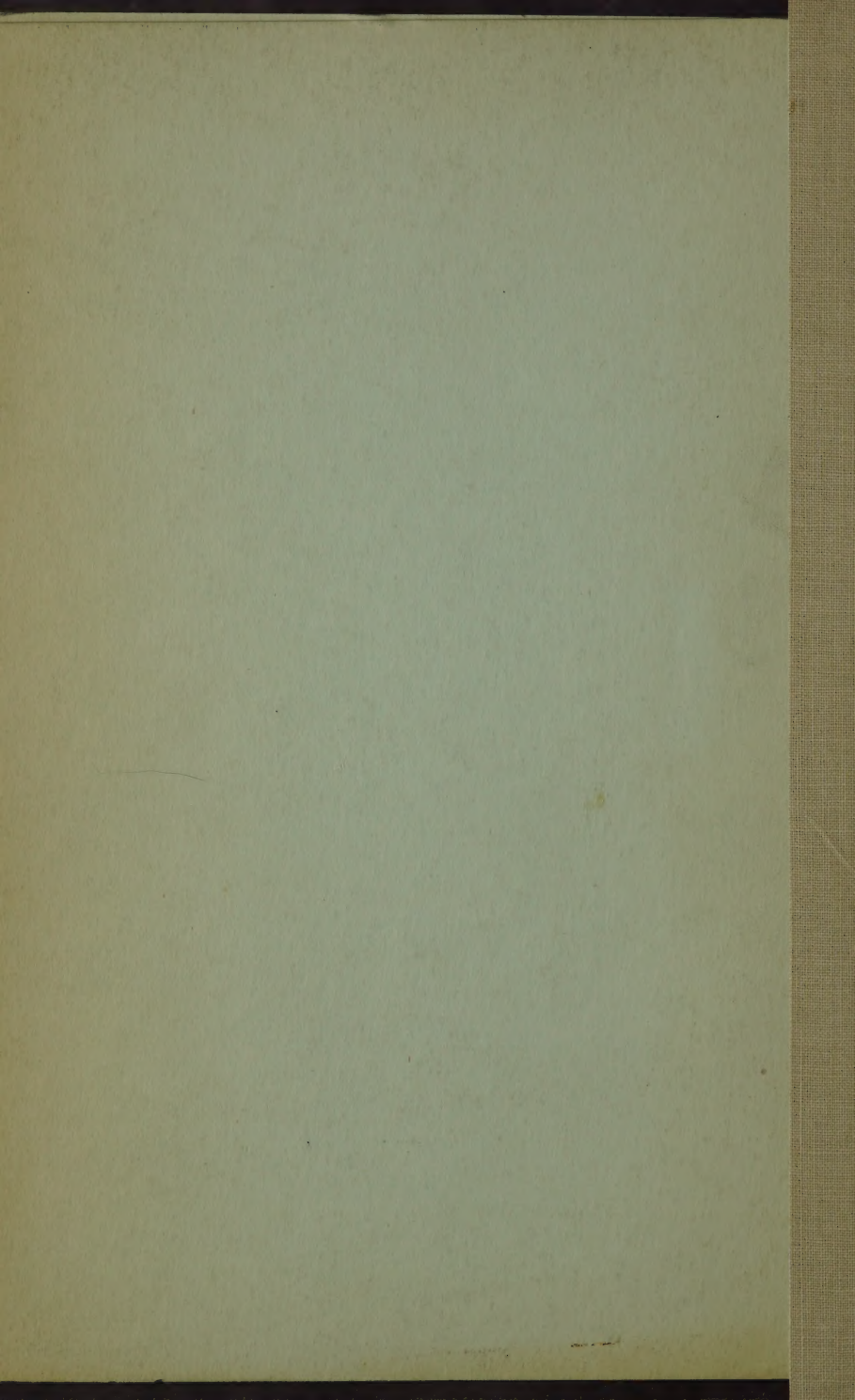
For hours we three talked, my questions and words translated to Helen Keller by the swift fingers of her teacher, or read from her lips; and then in strange tones, Miss Keller would answer. I asked her to name for me the ten greatest people who had lived during her lifetime,—that is, during the past half century. She hesitated and then with brilliant analysis of each, named off her heroes,—Lenin, Einstein, Ghandi, Mark Twain, Tagore, Edison, Bell, Wagner, Walt Whitman,—then she added—"and my teacher." And in the dedication of her last book, "Midstream," she wrote: "To Anne Sullivan, whose love is the story of my life."

Before I had gone to the little home at Forest Hills, Long Island, about fifteen miles from New York City, where the two of them live under the gentle and efficient care of the third member of "the institution," Miss Polly Thomson, friend, guide and philosopher, and, for the past fourteen years, their secretary, I had been charged by my

son to bring home an autograph of Helen Keller. And when I got ready to leave, I asked her for it. In a clear, round hand, Helen Keller wrote out: “We can do anything we want to if we stick at it long enough.” And I wish every school child in America would write that down and have it framed and hung over his desk or on his bedroom wall.

“We can do anything we want to, if we stick at it long enough.” That’s the story of Helen Keller—and of her inspired teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy—the light-giver.

(Broadcast on November 17, 1931)



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